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DVD Review: The Ultimate Matrix Collection

Abstract

This is a review of The Ultimate *Matrix* Collection, a 10-disc DVD set released in 2004.

One of the most exciting features of the recently minted Ultimate *Matrix* Collection, a 10-disc DVD set constructed around Andy and Larry Wachowski's audacious triumvirate of blockbusters, is a special "philosophers' commentary track." On this track, Princeton University religion professor Cornel West and the Integral Institute's Ken Wilber explore the religious and philosophical significance of the films that the collection celebrates: 1999's *The Matrix* and 2003's consecutively released *The Matrix Reloaded* and *The Matrix Revolutions*. As the now instantly recognizable lines of code trickle down the screen at the start of *The Matrix*, Dr. West (who also co-stars in *Reloaded* and *Revolutions*) remarks that this "quantitative stress" is quite a harbinger of what awaits viewers across the nearly seven hours of film to come. He isn't kidding: the two philosophers could not have more fertile celluloid to work with.

Part science fiction, part film noir, part martial arts ballet, part super-hero comic, part art house, and part grind house, with humor and romance to spare, the *Matrix* trilogy is also indebted to West and Wilber, Kant, the Bible, *Alice in Wonderland*, Philip K. Dick, the *Upanishads*, Baudrillard, Greek mythology, Descartes, William Gibson, and Mahayana Buddhist philosophy (among many other things) in its carefully textured philosophical ambitions. "Quantitative stress" indeed! It seems fitting then that West and Wilber conclude that the *Matrix* trilogy

is ultimately about "the acceptance of divinity in everything." Nothing is unsacred here - hence the Wachowski Brothers' kitchen-sink approach to filmmaking.

In *The Matrix*, we meet a depressed software engineer named Neo who discovers that his "reality" is nothing more than an elaborate, computer-programmed hoax piped directly into his brain (and everyone else's) by seemingly malevolent machines of artificial intelligence. A transcendently overwrought crowd-pleaser, *The Matrix* is a movie that both the sophisticate and the philistine can love: that so complex an inquiry into the nature of reality was processed through genre filmmaking to such supremely satisfying and thoroughly exhilarating results is no small miracle. The teleological *Reloaded* and eschatological *Revolutions*, our protagonist's further adventures, prove much less successful in most departments, but stylistic bravado abounds, and the philosophical ruminations remain admirably earnest and especially perspicacious.

As evidenced by West and Wilber's productive dialogue, the *Matrix* trilogy is a gift of unparalleled richness for cinéastes interpreting the sacred. The Ultimate *Matrix* Collection - with its light-hearted-but-serious-minded commentary from West and Wilber, and 30-plus hours of extra material - makes it the gift that keeps on giving. While the set will no doubt delight those looking for pure entertainment, it will most reward those looking to the films for spiritual substance, intellectual intrigue, and/or the potential for academic discourse. This impressive anthology

was clearly designed for viewers who, like Neo, have big questions to ask about themselves and their world.

Consider *Return to Source*, a documentary produced especially for the Ultimate *Matrix* Collection. A robust examination of the definite and possible religious/philosophical influences on the trilogy, the film includes interviews with West and Wilber, William Irwin (*The Matrix* and Philosophy), John Searle (Mind: A Brief Introduction), and the *Journal of Religion & Film*'s own reviews editor Rachel Wagner. The collection also contains the nine short animated films that comprise *The Animatrix* - a consistently clever and sporadically brilliant project created by the Wachowskis and some of the biggest names in Japanese animation that adds exciting new layers to the trilogy's epic take on metaphysics.

Of the dozens of featurettes included with the Ultimate *Matrix* Collection, fans of the series will be especially interested in *The Matrix Revisited*, a two-hour look back at *The Matrix*. The program is unique in that it includes interviews with the droll and notoriously press-shy Wachowskis (who provide only a short written introduction for this collection). A brutally honest "critics track" compliments the gushing of West and Wilber, just as a feature-length documentary about the scientific and technological influences on the films compliments *Return to Source*. The set also includes breathtaking new digital transfers of all three films, supervised by the Brothers and the series' visionary cinematographer Bill Pope.

But for all the bells and whistles, it is the underscored resonance of the films with the world's wisdom traditions that makes the set so special. Love or hate the trilogy, this collection is an extremely important contribution for those of us interested in the places where religious studies and film studies converge. Let's hope for more "quantitative stress" from contemporary cinema in the very near future. In the meantime, there is plenty here to keep us busy for a good, long while.